

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health and

## Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

---

### Witness Statement

---

**STATEMENT OF ROBERT G. STANTON, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE,  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEES ON FORESTS AND  
FOREST HEALTH AND NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS OF THE HOUSE  
RESOURCES COMMITTEE, CONCERNING FIRE MANAGEMENT ON FEDERAL LANDS.**

**JUNE 7, 2000**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to present the Department of the Interior's views on fire management on federal lands. Accompanying me are Karen Wade, Regional Director for the Intermountain Region of the National Park Service, Rick Gale, Chief of Fire and Aviation Management, and Jim Douglas, Emergency Coordinator, Office of Managing Risk and Public Safety for the Department of the Interior.

Before I address the broader fire management policy of the Department, let me address the recent fire in New Mexico, and begin by expressing my deepest apologies on behalf of the National Park Service to the residents of the Los Alamos area and to the other citizens of New Mexico. We have taken responsibility for the Cerro Grande fire. We are deeply sorry for the personal pain and property loss that has resulted from our actions. We are committed to doing everything within our power to help the residents of Los Alamos to recover their losses fully and without delay. And also are committed to doing everything within our power to ensure that there is no repeat of this kind of tragedy.

### Cerro Grande Fire

On May 4, 2000, in the late evening, fire personnel at Bandelier National Monument, a unit of the National Park Service, ignited a prescribed fire that was identified in an approved planning document. Because of slopover fire across the fireline, the prescribed fire was declared a wildfire at 1:00 p.m. on May 5<sup>th</sup> and managed as a wild fire from that point on. Aggressive backfire operations combined with sudden high winds on May 7<sup>th</sup> resulted in major fire activity that caused the fire to move out of control to the east, onto the Santa Fe National Forest. The towns of Los Alamos and White Rock were in the fire's paths and more than 18,000 residents were evacuated. By the end of May 10<sup>th</sup>, the fire had burned 18,000 acres, destroyed 260 structures, including 400 residences, and damaged many other structures. The fire spread towards the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and although fires spotted onto the facility's lands, all major structures were secured. The fire also burned other private lands and portions of San Ildefonso Pueblo and Santa Clara Pueblo. Ultimately, the fire burned more than 42,000 acres and destroyed or damaged more than 380 structures. Fortunately, we are aware of no deaths or injuries caused by the fire.

On May 11<sup>th</sup> Secretary Babbitt formed an interagency Fire Investigation Team to examine events and circumstances from the beginning of planning the prescribed fire until the fire was turned over to a Type 1 Incident Management Team on May 8<sup>th</sup>. The team included more than 40 professionals from a variety of agencies across the country including many with substantial fire management experience. The findings and recommendations were based on four factors:

- § interviews with key personnel and other people who witnessed the fire;
- § documents associated with approval and implementation of the prescribed fire;
- § on-site observations; and
- § technical analyses of factors including weather, climate, and fire behavior.

The team concluded that federal personnel failed to properly plan and implement the Upper Frijoles Prescribed Fire, which became known as the Cerro Grande Fire. Throughout the planning and implementation, many critical mistakes were made. The findings of the team were that government officials failed:

- § to utilize the correct National Park Service complexity analysis process;
- § to provide substantive review of the prescribed fire plan before it was approved;
- § to evaluate conditions adjacent to the prescribed fire boundary with regard to fire behavior, fuel conditions, and public safety in the event the fire crossed the prescribed burn boundaries;
- § to complete and document the onsite review of critical conditions identified in the prescribed fire plan prior to ignition;
- § to provide adequate contingency resources to successfully suppress the fire;
- § to provide any wind predictions in the 3-5 day forecast for the periods of May 7 to May 9; and
- § to follow safety policies for firefighters and the public.

The investigation team stated that the overall Federal Wildland Fire Policy which this prescribed burn should have followed is sound; however, the success of the policy depends upon strict adherence to the implementation guidelines/standards throughout every agency and at every level for it to be effective. What the investigation team's report conclusively shows is that, instead of following established policies and procedures, government employees made a series of serious errors which, in combination, led to this tragedy.

On May 18<sup>th</sup>, Secretary Babbitt appointed a four-person independent review board to review the findings and recommendations presented in the Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Investigation Report. This board concluded that the findings and recommendations contained in the Cerro Grande Investigation Report are logical, valid conclusions - with the exception of the recommendation regarding the 3-5 day wind forecast. The Review Board stated that the National Weather Service did comply with existing policies and working agreements in providing weather information, and cannot be expected to provide wind forecasts that far in advance, contrary to the conclusion presented in the original report.

The board also developed additional recommendations in six categories that support the findings of the Investigation Team:

- § Safety: All components of a prescribed fire plan must be followed to ensure that safety objectives are met. One individual should be designated with the sole responsibility for safety oversight during burn implementation.
- § Management Oversight: Agency administrators are the key link in the success of the wildland fire management program. Their attitude and commitment to safety is critical. They must set the tone for serious, conscientious implementation of all components of a prescribed burn plan and ensure

linkages to other overarching plans and fire management policies.

§ Communication and Coordination: Substantial and continual coordination and cooperation must occur in planning and implementing fire management activities.

§ Prescribed Fire Planning and Plan Review: Fire management plans and prescribed fire plans should be developed through an open collaborative process, affording opportunities for internal and external review prior to approval. Complexity rating systems should be consistent across agencies, recognizing geographical differences. Fire management personnel must be fully trained in the application of these systems.

§ Contingency Planning: Contingency resources need to be defined; identified; their availability assured; and their use described during the contingency planning and plan implementation process. Contingency resource costs must be included in the project cost.

§ Weather: The National Wildfire Coordinating Group's Fire Weather Working team should review weather needs of wildland fire managers and the capabilities of the National Weather Service to ensure that necessary weather information is available.

The Review Board stated that applying fire to the landscape is an essential tool for good resource management and at the same time is one of the most significant decisions resource managers make. For it to be successful it must be planned and implemented in an open, collaborative manner and approached with the seriousness and attention this type of inherently dangerous situation deserves.

### **Post Fire Actions**

Almost immediately after the Cerro Grande fire was declared a wildfire, Secretary Babbitt and Secretary of Agriculture Glickman issued a moratorium on prescribed fire for all federal agencies on lands they administer west of the 100<sup>th</sup> meridian. The moratorium for all other federal agencies will expire as scheduled on June 12. For the National Park Service the moratorium on prescribed burns has been extended indefinitely, subject to the exemptions originally laid out by Secretaries Babbitt and Glickman.

In addition to the investigative report and review, the National Park Service has begun the appropriate procedures to determine whether personnel actions should be taken in regard to the way this burn was conducted. The Secretary has also asked the National Academy for Public Administration to conduct an independent, comprehensive review of the implementation of prescribed burning policies by the National Park Service and to make recommendations for correcting these problems.

We understand that the General Accounting Office has begun a review of the events involved in the Cerro Grande fire. We will cooperate fully with all aspects of this review.

The Burn Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) team, an interagency team that includes representatives from all the land management agencies, arrived in Los Alamos the week of May 15<sup>th</sup> to assess the burn conditions and to make recommendations for emergency rehabilitation projects to help reduce further natural resource damage. The BAER Team is expected to release its report this week. Several projects have already been started. To help water soak into the soil and prepare for grass seeding, five crews containing more than 90 people have been contour raking portions of the burn area. About 750,000 pounds of a fast growing grass seed mix was purchased by the Natural Resource Conservation Service. Aerial reseeding began last Thursday and is scheduled to be completed by Friday. The team is using bulldozers to rework forest roads, crews are placing more than 3,000 bales of straw in critical locations and rehabilitating fire lines. Also, crews are contour falling trees, which means cutting the trees so that they will lie across the slope reducing the threat of water run off and erosion. Hundreds of volunteers from surrounding communities are also assisting in these efforts.

§ The Administration is fully committed to ensuring that all who have sustained losses in this fire are completely compensated in a timely manner. The Department is assisting in the development of a legislative package to fulfill this commitment.

We have the responsibility to review our prescribed fire program and to correct any deficiencies and we will take the actions needed to ensure that this type of terrible tragedy is not repeated.

I am also working with Secretary Babbitt and the other directors of land managing agencies to review and resolve any concerns related to the training, implementation, and interagency coordination elements of our prescribed fire program.

### **Department Policy**

The Department uses prescribed fire to maintain the health of the lands we administer and to reduce the chances of catastrophic wildland fires. Successful fire suppression efforts for 100 years or so have led to unnatural and dangerous buildups of fuel in our forests, creating conditions that can lead to fires on a scale not possible in natural conditions. Under carefully planned conditions, fire has safety and ecological benefits that cannot be obtained solely by mechanical or chemical treatments. Fire is often the only effective way to remove small diameter woody fuels that can cause hazardous fuel buildups and to break down nutrients into ash, promoting vigorous new growth and allowing seeds from some plant species to germinate. In all of our prescribed fire activities safety of fire fighters and the public is our first priority.

The Department works closely with other state, federal and local agencies, especially the U.S. Forest Service, in preparedness and suppression of wildland fires and fuels management, particularly the use of fire to reduce wildland fire danger and restore and maintain healthy, sustainable natural systems. Although there is always room for improvement, all bureaus in the Department with ongoing fire programs have policies and programs designed to cooperate and work with each other, as well as with the Forest Service, in fire management.

This cooperation was exemplified in 1995 when the Departments of Agriculture and Interior established a joint fire management policy with the completion of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review Final Report. The policy that was developed is based on several established guiding principles. They include:

- § firefighter and public safety is the first priority in every fire management activity;
- § the role of fire as an essential ecological process and natural change agent will be incorporated into the planning process;
- § fire management plans, programs, and activities support land and resource management plans and their implementation;
- § fire management programs and activities are based on the best available science; and
- § fire management plans and activities incorporate public health and environmental quality considerations.

Also, the set of policies contain a number of key elements, including:

- § Protection of human life is reaffirmed as the first priority in wildland fire management, with protection of property and natural/cultural resources being considered jointly the second priority, with protection decisions based on values to be protected and other considerations.

§ The role of wildland fire as an essential ecological process and natural change agent must be reintroduced into the ecosystem. This is accomplished across agency boundaries, using the best available science.

§ Where wildland fire cannot be safely reintroduced because of hazardous fuel buildups, some form of pretreatment must be considered, particularly in wildland/urban interface areas.

§ Wildland fire decisions must be closely linked to resource management goals and objectives and must have the flexibility to select from a full array of appropriate management actions on any unplanned ignition. The options include full and immediate suppression where there are significant values to be protected to allowing fires to burn where they can fulfill their natural ecological role without risk to human safety, property or other values to be protected.

§ Wildland fire management requires participation of all partners, and that all partners have compatible programs and activities.

§ The Federal agencies are partners in managing wildland fire in the urban interface, but the primary responsibility for structural protection rests with tribal, state and local governments.

§ Federal agencies must place more emphasis on educating internal and external audiences about how and why we use and manage wildland fire.

§ Good fire management requires a sound scientific knowledge of fire ecology, good technical support from common information systems, and cooperative efforts to provide the technical tools for analyzing fire management problems.

Accumulation of both dead and live fuels to unnatural and hazardous levels, particularly in a wildland/urban interface, is one of the greatest challenges facing wildland fire management today. One hundred years of fire suppression together with increasing development along the boundary of federal lands have contributed to this increasing problem. The only way to reduce the risk of loss of life and property from the fires that can result from so many years of successful fire suppression is to attack the fundamental problem - reduce fuels to more manageable levels and restore wildland fire to its natural ecological role.

### **Benefits of Prescribed Fire**

Fire is a natural force in the development and maintenance of forest and range ecosystems. It has played an important role, and attempts to exclude it have frequently altered the vegetation to undesirable conditions. Fire recycles nutrients, reduces biomass, influences insects and disease populations, and is the principal change agent affecting vegetative structure and density, composition, and biological diversity. Over time, by altering fire frequency and intensity we have adversely affected wildlife habitat, watersheds, and recreation.

It is impossible to completely exclude fire from the landscape. Therefore, we must continue to use fire judiciously, now and in the future, so we can work with natural systems more economically and rationally, rather than trying to force the system into unstable patterns.

Prescribed fire is designed to reintroduce wildland fire into an ecosystem where it has been suppressed or eliminated and is needed to restore ecosystem health. This reintroduction of fire is critically important to prevent catastrophic fires in areas of excessive fuel buildup. Even with a continuing commitment to the use of prescribed fire, it will take decades to fully reverse hazardous fuel accumulations and unnatural ecosystem changes that have developed in the last one hundred years. Many areas may require more than one treatment either through prescribed fire or by mechanical means, or both, before fuels and ecosystem components stabilize. Many areas will have to be treated periodically, forever. Managers must continue to balance a suppression program with a program of prescribed fire if we are to meet stewardship

responsibilities.

But prescribed fire also poses a great challenge to Federal land managers. The reintroduction of fire to the landscape is one of the highest risk activities practiced by land management agencies. Firefighter and public safety is the highest priority in every fire management activity. If we cannot reasonably assure safety then, the use of fire as a management tool will not be considered. While this does not mean that the use of fire is totally risk free, it does mean that risks and uncertainties relating to prescribed fire management activities need to be understood, analyzed, communicated and mitigated to the extent possible. When risk cannot be mitigated to acceptable limits, prescribed fire will or cannot be used.

To help limit the risk involved, in August 1998 the Federal wildland fire management agencies issued a prescribed fire implementation guide. This document, the "Wildland and Prescribed Fire Management Policy: Implementation Procedures Reference Guide," includes recommended formats for consistent implementation of the appropriate management response for each wildland fire occurrence and prescribed fire application. The Department actively participated in the development of, and supports the use of, this guide.

The National Wildfire Coordinating Group's efforts to develop national standards for prescribed fire plans, national training courses, and qualification standards for personnel involved with prescribed fire operations has improved interagency sharing and is reducing the risk associated with prescribed fire activities. Bureaus within the Department, along with the Forest Service and others, have joined together to develop and carry out training activities. In addition to the benefit of increasing the skill level of firefighters throughout the government, this training makes better use of specialized personnel during times when wildland firefighting activity is low.

Prescribed burning is influenced significantly by varying weather conditions. Limiting weather factors include wind speed, temperature, and relative humidity. Also, for any given area, favorable burning conditions are limited to certain periods of the year. To achieve ecological and hazardous fuel reduction goals, prescribed fires may have to be conducted under weather conditions normally associated with the fire season. However, the well-planned and judicious use of prescribed fire can ultimately result in a long-term decrease in the need for overall fire suppression activities.

All of the land management agencies within the Department of the Interior continue to acknowledge the critical role fire plays in ecosystems. As land managers we must continue not only to suppress fire where necessary but also to manage fire.

### **Prescribed Fire in the National Park Service**

The information we have provided to the subcommittees for this hearing shows the extent of the prescribed fire program for the Interior land management agencies. Over the last several years all of the land management bureaus within the Department have become more involved in prescribed fire. This has resulted not only in increased numbers of acres treated by prescribed fire, but also enhanced training opportunities, sharing of bureau expertise, and overall bureau cooperation.

In the National Park Service, pioneering use of fire began in the 1950's as part of the management of Everglades National Park. Prescribed fire became an integral part of our fire management program in 1968 and is being used more frequently in response to altered fuel and vegetation regimes servicewide. We support the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and Program Review Report of 1995 which advocates continued and even increasing use of prescribed fire to accomplish resource benefits. This report states that prescribed fire is a well-established and accepted practice utilized by public and private land managers in a fully integrated program to improve forest and rangeland health and to maintain ecosystems.

National Park Service policy requires specific planning, preparation, implementation, and evaluation

procedures for each prescribed fire. Each step in the application of prescribed fire is prepared and approved by personnel meeting specific qualification standards.

As prescribed fire use has increased, the difficulty of implementation, altered fuel regimes, and other cascading factors have all interacted to elevate complexity. Since 1968, the National Park Service has conducted almost 3,800 prescribed fires, treating almost 900,000 acres. In that time 38 fires - or one in 100 - escaped some portion of the containment area. Almost all of those escapes are quickly controlled and result in little or no damage.

The Cerro Grande fire, on the other hand, is the most powerful possible illustration of what can occur from a prescribed fire that is not properly planned and executed. We are committed to ensuring that the mistakes that led to it are not repeated, so that we can continue to get the safety and environmental benefits of a prescribed fire program, with no more tragedies of this type.

That concludes my statement. I will be happy to respond to any questions that the members of the subcommittees may have.

# # #